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ABSTRACT

Re-entry female students are unique in one particularly important way: they respond and grow under even the most difficult conditions. The classroom and the text are two contexts in which the factor of gender appears to have affected these students' attitudes toward writing and their expectations as writers. Central to both of these contexts are the instructors' attitudes toward the students as well as their expectations for the students' development as writers. Findings on these students and their attitudes toward writing can be categorized into two areas, voiced (stated) findings controlled by the pedagogical focus, and voiceless (unstated) findings eclipsed by the pedagogical focus. Because of these factors, gender-related issues are problematic for researchers in composition, particularly doctoral candidates. (MM)

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VOICED AND VOICELESS FINDINGS: THE GENDER GAP IN COMPOSITION RESEARCH

A paper presented at
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by

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ABSTRACT

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VOICED AND VOICELESS FINDINGS: THE GENDER GAP

Following a study of re-entry women students in first semester college writing classes in which I researched both internal and external factors characteristic of these learners, I was able to conclude that re-entry women are unique students in one particularly important way: they respond and grow under even the most difficult conditions. What I failed to examine among the data were gender-related explanations.

This presentation will focus on two contexts in which the factor of gender appears to have affected the students' attitudes toward writing and their expectations as writers: the classroom and the text. Central to both of these contexts are the instructors' attitudes toward the students as well as their expectations for the students' development as writers. (Of the four instructors involved in the study, two were male and two female.) Regarding the context of the classroom, emphasis will be placed on ambience as well as on mode of instruction. Regarding the context of student text, emphasis will be placed on manner and tone of instructor commentary as well as on student response to the instructors' comments.

The presentation will conclude with a brief discussion of the problematic nature of gender-related issues for researchers in composition, particularly doctoral candidates.

VOICED AND VOICELESS FINDINGS: THE GENDER GAP

In 1985, as I was nearing completion of my doctoral studies, reaching a point at which I had to make a decision regarding a topic for my dissertation, the numbers of students identifiable as re-entry women were steadily increasing on my campus--and in my classes. This phenomenon suddenly represented opportunity for me. Exactly what this opportunity was remained unclear for a period of time as I sought research that would help me focus a study of this population. After extensive reading, I found no reported research which examined, specifically, re-entry women in composition classes.

Aware of the numbers of non-traditional students in my workplace, a two-year commuter campus, my committee didn't question the appropriateness of the population. They never challenged my intention to study only women; I did not question their support. I would suspect that their interest at this point was similar to mine: here was a fertile ground for composition research. Their concern focused, primarily, on methodology. I foresaw qualitative research as the only possible way to get in touch with the answers to the questions that had begun to form regarding factors that influence re-entry women students in college composition classes. Although the committee's prior experience had been primarily quantitative, once again, they did not object. Their primary concern--and mine--was that I complete a study that would inform the teaching of the population. Pedagogy, therefore, became a controlling focus, not only in the shaping of research questions, but also in the selecting of appropriate intersecting research tools and data sources, and in my reporting the findings. At no point in my work beyond that of the initial identification of subjects did I consider gender an influencing factor.

In retrospect, I can see that my oversight of the factor of gender may explain some of the interpretive gaps that remain in my dissertation; however,

at the time of the writing it forced me to look beyond what might have been a more facile explanation, pushing me ever toward triangulation, toward proof, and away from conjecture. I do not regret that fact, because I am a product of socio-political constructs that have made it difficult for me to believe sufficiently in my knowing to have the courage to test my ideas in the public forum. Clean research, research unmuddied by implications of gender, was safe. My research would not have been supported then, it would be now by the additional work of women such as Mary Belenky and her colleagues, published in the book Women's Ways of Knowing (1986), and others. Like the women of my research, I had accepted a challenge at considerable risk and was eager to stay within the pedagogical template I had carefully negotiated with my committee.

Before I focus on specific gaps in my findings which I should like to call voiceless findings, I would like to digress to share an anecdote of my own dissertation process that will--I believe--inform my discussion. I recall on one occasion sitting in the office of the director of my project, watching him closely as he read, searching his face, his posture for signs of approval--or disapproval--when, suddenly, he broke the awkward silence with a hearty laugh. Quickly I telescoped the chapter in my mind. I could not recall any data that was intentionally humorous, and, of course, jumped to the immediate conclusion that I had committed some grievous blunder. I asked, "What is it?" To which he replied that he was suddenly struck by the realization that I embodied in many ways the composite of the women I was studying. The sense that I was drafting a feminist piece had occurred to him by this time. It honestly never occurred to me until much later when he mentioned gender as a factor that influenced the behavior of my committee in its review and discussion of the dissertation. Apparently insecure in their

own experience with and knowledge of either my subjects or their constructs, the committee hesitated to challenge my findings. The factor of gender--theirs, on this occasion--entered the reading and responding process of my predominantly male committee.

* * *

To accomplish a meaningful discussion of the gender gap as I perceive it in my research I must at this point focus carefully. To do so I will examine several voiced (stated) findings closely in an attempt to articulate the voiceless (unstated) findings eclipsed by the pedagogical focus.

The research question was: taking into consideration the internal and external factors which affect the way re-entry women learn and write, are there certain modes and focuses more appropriate than others in their writing instruction?

Following data collection from a variety of sources including several surveys, interviews, video-taped writing sessions and retrospective protocols, portfolios, and teaching evaluations, I was able to enumerate many influencing factors, including the following:

- Fear of failure
- Doubt about the ability to learn
- Low self-esteem
- Diminished value of life experience.
- Guilt about neglect of family/home
- Concern about not fitting in
- Time management
- Intimidation by instructors
- Spousal non-support

Of course none of these factors would surprise feminist writer-researchers Adrienne Rich (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, 1979), Carol Gilligan (In a Different Voice, 1982), or Mary Belenky and her colleagues (Women's Ways of Knowing, 1986). They had observed the lack of confidence in meaning-making and meaning-sharing and had reported, "Feeling cut off from all internal and external sources of intelligence, women fail to develop their minds and see themselves as remarkably powerless and dependent...since thay cannot trust their ability to understand and to remember what was said, they rely on the continued presence of authorities to guide their actions" (Belenky, 28). My research goes beyond the point of entry, beyond the fear, the doubt, and the guilt to examine the development of the women, observing the extent to which, as Belenky remarks, "the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined" (18). The intricate web of internal and external factors that affects the attitude and performance of the re-entry woman is not, of course, distinct from that which impinges on the process and products of the re-entry writer.

The first blatant example of the exclusion of gender-based explanation is found in my reporting of the Writing History Survey data I had collected. I reported such rich responses to questions about the value of writing as "Writing is very important! I only wish I could," (Greenwood, 78). And I found value in responses to questions about perceived strengths and weaknesses in the use of language which confirmed the re-entry student's preoccupation with correctness and sensitivity to audience such as, "I choose my words carefully. I care about people and would never intentionally hurt someone," (79) or "I wrote in a journal because that was the only place I could say what I thought without being sent to the principal's office," or about instruction, "He was prejudiced against girls," or "I always seemed to get good grades, but

felt I didn't deserve them because I never liked my content" (82). Yet my text reads: "The portrait of the re-entry woman writer, with the addition of the historical data, now includes external factors relating specifically to the act of composing. The extent to which its value, its conception, and for most, its implicit risk created constructs upon which college instructors and instruction had to build will be revealed in other data. This writing history data reveals that the students had received traditional instruction" (82).

The voiced revelation, controlled by the pedagogical focus. The voiceless revelation would have been gender-specific, posing, perhaps the question asked by Adrienne Rich: "How can we teach women to move beyond the desire for male approval and getting 'good grades' and seek and write their own truths that the culture has distorted or made taboo?" (240). Or, observing as Belenky did that "Women typically approach adulthood with the understanding that the care and empowerment of others is central to their life's work...Authorities hold considerable leverage and can be in particularly strategic positions to help these women find the power that can reside in their own minds, as well as in the minds of others" (48-49).

It is appropriate at this point to mention the instructors who taught the composition classes from which I collected data for the study. Two were male; two female. While I surveyed the instructors' attitudes toward the women and reported it, I did not elaborate on the now obvious differences between the male and female instructors; rather, I summarized their observations, identifying them, collectively, as strongly supportive of the students. I failed to note, however, that it was the male instructors who observed: "I probably expect more of the women because they've worked harder in the past. I expect them to be more fluent, too," and, "Since as a group over the years women students have delivered more valuable goods, I have come to look for

superior products. They seem to sense this condition and, as a result, try harder." And, finally, "Though few in number, regularly [note the contradiction] problems interfere with their studies--children, current or ex- or future spouses, illness, work schedules, emotional crises" (Greenwood, 56-57). The voiced interpretation of the data cited the positive difference the women made in the ambience of the classroom as well as in the instructors' attitudes toward the classes. The observation that the male instructors had dangerously high and unjustifiably certain expectations of these students remained unexpressed. Yet, as Belenky observes, "In accepting the authorties' standards, the separate knowers make themselves vulnerable to their criticism" (107).

These high expectations, of course, influence the mode and focus of instruction in subtle ways, ways consistent both with the anticipation of superior performance by this group of students, and consistent with the misapprehension of the students' constructs. Once again, in my examination of data, however, the pedagogical force eclipsed any other explanation for the conflicts that arose in the classes of one of the male instructors. Carefully I delineated his philosophy of teaching; carefully I assigned the clearly problematic features of his instruction to precisely that: his instruction--deeply grounded in old-paradigm English education. That was easy to do. He believed in formal instruction of grammar; he believed that he was responsible for correcting the students' oral language; he believed that class time should not be devoted to peer activities of any kind, but rather to lecture; he believed that successful writing could be achieved only if all writing was carefully marked by the instructor; he believed that an instructor should mark

every detected error on a student's paper, and used red ink to do so; he demanded perfect copy without giving students the benefit of instruction in the writing process.

Even as the data accrued and I noted that comments on his papers differed considerably from those of the female instructors, I did not attribute either those comments or the students' reactions to them to anything other than unfortunate, uninformed pedagogy. And yet as I review my data and my dissertation I see missed opportunities for understanding; especially when I note that the women were responding to the students' voice and tone, "Your voice is clear. I feel your pain" (Greenwood, 60), while his comments were generally limited to mechanics--as they were, for instance, on the very first essay submitted by one of the sudents, "See the mechanics closely. Work to prepare nearly perfect copy" (60), or on a paper of 435 words, "No more shortees" (101).

Nor did I seek an explanation other than pedagogical when I noted the apprehension of the group in this instructor's class as they faced their first in-class writing assignment: "I'm afraid of the subject he might pick. I won't have time to refine my work. He'll get it raw. I hope he takes that into consideration" (Greenwood, 103), or when I spoke with them in a mid-term interview and heard them remark about their inability to estimate their chance for success and add, "Why did I get a 91 on this paper and a 75 on this one? I don't know. I didn't do anything different." "How am I ever going to get through this?" (111). Or even after a final interview when one of the students stated, "He gave us a lot of proofing symbols and when he put them on my paper I had to go back and figure out what he meant, then I had to run to a dictionary or his little handbook to figure out what it was I did wrong. I am still not sure what I ever did right," and her classmate added: "He made me

feel the need to challenge him, to show him I could do those things right that he showed me I was doing wrong, but the harder I tried, the more I did wrong. I had to learn from my mistakes--that's how he taught" (111). While I did mention that the common factors of little initial confidence and strong goal orientation led to the students' indefatigable pursuit of their instructors' composition goals, I did not apprehend the gender-specific explanation of their behavior: "the women see blind obedience to authorities as being of utmost importance for keeping out of trouble and insuring their own survival, because trying to know 'why' is not thought to be particularly possible or important" (Belenky, 28).

Voiced in my discussion of this data was the achievement of an acceptable solution on the part of one of the students: "Her solution to lack of encouragement or advice was simple: 'I just felt no matter what I did it wasn't going to please him, and I thought that that is too bad, so I just kept writing to please me, and I didn't care if it pleased him or not'" (Greenwood, 111). Unvoiced was the rich interpretation possible, the struggle for independence, for empowerment; the tough-mindedness of the student--heretofore the privilege only of the critic--in an environment that represented not only traditional instruction, but traditional obstacles to the women's development.

Thinking about the education of women, Adrienne Rich (1979) wrote, "A woman, like any other human being needs to know that the mind makes mistakes...that she is capable of intelligent thought, and she needs to know it right away..." (240). I knew that. But the student of my study knew only that her thinking and its expression were both inadequate; her instructor reminded her of that fact regularly in his marginal comments. Unvoiced also was the observation by one of the women in Belenky's study, "You need a little

bit of praise to keep you going" (197), and Belenky's conviction that intellectual development can be impeded rather than promoted by unrelenting academic pressure.

Although I did make the statement in the dissertation that none of the students of the professor in question had requested a conference, I did not follow through with that information, either, leaving unexpressed the gender-related explanation: the women were afraid of confrontation. They hesitated to challenge the instructor's authority, believing that what he taught must be what was important in the teaching of writing.

* * *

In this brief discussion only a cursory review of the data has been possible. I believe it necessary, in closing, to reflect on the broader scope of gender-related implications for my research and my attempt to achieve public confirmation of the importance of the subject. To this point, I have failed to publish the research. Having re-viewed it, I have come to understand that that failure, also, might well be attributed to gender issues: specifically, voice; more generally, internal factors which, because of the relentless effort to be good, to please, to allow personal goals to be subsumed by the dictates of the academy, prevent the development of a strong, clear, authentic voice. As my project director observed, in many ways I am the embodiment of the women I studied. For even after he assured me that I should not hesitate to write with strong conviction in my discussion of data and the subsequent recommendations for instruction, I did not move beyond the limits of the template: pedagogy. I suggested that the re-entry students responded and grew in certain classroom environments--that mode and focus were significant, contributing factors. But my own voice failed when I took the

position: "What I can recommend after observing this group of women enter and complete a semester of collegiate work is neither special treatment nor separate treatment, but rather considerate treatment not unlike that which ought to be given to all of our students all of the time" (Greenwood, 148).

It is apparent to me now that I was promoting the process methodology of writing instruction not, primarily, because, allowing for the bridging of private and shared experience, for stretching and exploring, it encouraged the kind of growth I did recognize and report in my findings--the growth in thinking revealed in the following:

> I think I have grown mainly because having not gone to school for so long it is almost as if my mind had stopped. You can go to work every day and you can deal with your family, your children every day, but that's different. There's something--a third type of thing you can do--and that's <u>real</u> <u>thinking</u>. I was amazed at some of the things I was able to come up with or think, because I hadn't thought like that before I went to school. But now that I've been forced into thinking I can see that the possibilities are unlimited. (Greenwood, 116-117)

I was promoting the pedagogy because doing so met the expectations of my committee.

Following this student's powerful revelation my remarks were once again controlled by and limited to the pedagogical focus: "This student had written ten compositions during the semester, each encouraging experimentation with different rhetorical strategies, aims, and audiences" (146). I never mentioned the fact that she was in the student-centered class of one of the female instructors, an environment that facilitated the development of her mind and helped her to find her voice.

It is also apparent to me now that I listened to the internal voice that warned against risk and tempered my message; that I never allowed myself the unbridled, public celebration of the tough growing the women had accomplished, or the unrestricted criticism of instruction that perpetuates the myth of the all-powerful if not overpowering male authority figure in the composition classroom.

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